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## The Homeplace - Not the Marketplace: Developing a Critical Feminist Approach to Adult Education

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# **The Homeplace - Not the Marketplace: Developing a Critical Feminist Approach to Adult Education**

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**Abstract: In this paper I explore the development of a critical feminist theoretical approach that draws upon Habermasian theory and feminist discourses to examine connections between adult education and the homeplace.**

## **Introduction**

Currently, there is a pervasive 'bottom-line' mentality that reinforces the dictates of the marketplace in adult education. Globalized capitalism has created an almost universal sense of unease and anxiety as individuals and nation-states compete against one another. In this climate, a technical-rational perspective on adult education has gained ascendancy. While some critical adult educators (Collins, 1990; Welton, 1995) have drawn upon the work of Habermas (1984, 1996) to expose some of the limitations of narrow, short-sighted agenda for adult education, some feminist theorists (Hart, 1997, Miles, 1996) have proposed an even more radical critique that challenges underlying masculinist values that serve to give primacy to profit over life. I argue that a new focus for adult education can be developed using a critical feminist approach that examines connections to the homeplace, rather than the marketplace.

## **The Marketplace**

The marketplace influence has encouraged the development of short-sighted and competitive approaches to adult education, leading to an ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots in our world (Hart, 1992). We can see this competition at all different levels, from individuals to nation-states. Like the little boy with his finger stuck in a dike, many individuals are turning to adult education to shore up their own barricades against the capricious tides of the globalized marketplace. Education is means to bolster their own individual credentials and to locate themselves where they will be safe from the rising tide of unemployment, corporate downsizing, and shrinking social safety nets. The core workforce has increasing access to continuing educational opportunities, while those on the periphery (women and minorities are overrepresented in this sector) are further marginalized (Hart, 1992).

A couple of decades ago the Faure Report (1972) presented a powerful argument for implementing lifelong learning as a goal to foster democratic opportunities that would help to promote equality between nations and foster world-wide development. Increasingly, however, education is being used to broaden rather than diminish the chasm between North and South. As a more recent UNESCO report notes, education is increasingly becoming a means to widen, rather than narrow the gap between rich and poor nations (Delors, 1996). Nationalistic discourses

advocate the expansion of educational programs primarily to ensure that industrialized nations will be able to retain a superior competitive position in an increasingly cut-throat globalized marketplace, thus undermining democratic and egalitarian ideals in education.

But what if adult educators were to challenge this current focus in adult education, to question the market-directed agenda, to foster an alternative and more inclusive vision of the purposes of education? What if the focus of adult education was on enhancing production for life rather than production for profit (Hart, 1992)?

To examine these possibilities, we first need to name and critique the dominant marketplace discourse in education. We need to see how pervasive the language of the marketplace is, and to understand how it reframes our ideological construction of education. When we refer to students as 'clients' and 'consumers', and worry about developing glossy promotional materials for programs, it changes the way we view education (Barret, 1996). A narrow, competitive focus on the 'bottom line' develops that undermines the broader emancipatory potential for adult education, blinding many of us to alternative discourses and perspectives.

### **Communicative Action and Civil Society**

A number of critical educational theorists have drawn upon the work of Jurgen Habermas, both to critique this narrow technical-rational approach to education, and to examine possibilities for a communicative form of learning. Habermas's work draws upon a broad European theoretical tradition to develop a critique of modern society and suggestions for how the development of communicative action to lead to a renewal of civil society may provide some an alternative prospectus for the development of modern society.

Habermas (1987, 1996) argues that with the advent of modernity, traditional forms of communication weakened as the system (the political-economic sector) became increasingly disengaged from the lifeworld (family, community, and church). As the system has grown in size and power, the lifeworld, which has traditionally served as the realm in which moral and ethical decisions are communicatively determined, has been undermined. The pervasive controlling influence of the system has encroached upon lifeworld preserves, creating pathologies that we can see in weakened moral structures. In the face of these changes, technical-rationality, a means-end type of approach, had gained dominance. Decisions about governance are made in such a way that the values traditionally upheld in the realm of the lifeworld are rendered irrelevant.

Critical adult educators have seen that this comprehensive model of the effects of modernity can tell us much about the current marketplace orientation in adult education. Welton argues that "Habermas' famous metaphor - the "colonization of the lifeworld" is constructed to both capture the deformations of late capitalist societies and to identify the critical learning potential of our present moment" (1995, p. 143). Habermas' argument is that the lifeworld has been "colonized" by the system, so that the technical-rational interests of the marketplace (system) encroach upon the values and beliefs traditionally held in the home and community (lifeworld). Examples of this same colonization process can be seen in the adult education field through the broad acceptance of a marketplace mandated agenda. Programs that are designed primarily with

employers' interests in mind, such as competency-based training programs, define "useful knowledge in the light of bureaucratic and corporate needs" (Collins, 1991, p. 45).

To reassert lifeworld values, such as equity and justice, we can draw upon Habermas' theory of communicative action to focus on the potential for building civil society. In doing so, we may be able shore up the defenses of the lifeworld to create a new, critical focus for adult educators. Welton argues that "the *core values* of adult education are most compatible with a *discursive* understanding of democracy" (1997, p. 215). Communicative action entails creating spaces for open and empathetic discussions to lead to a more democratic form of learning. By building civil society, as a sphere where common citizens can come together to voice their concerns and initiate changes, adult education may be able to recapture the fundamental lifeworld values that are often lost in educational discourses characterized by a marketplace agenda.

While critical theorists have been able to uncover many of the limitations of a marketplace discourse in education, many feminists argue that their critique of instrumental rationality is a critique of values that have been privileged within a masculine, rather than a feminine discourse (Gore, 1992; Luke, 1993). The "system" that Habermas talks about did not come into existence independently. It emerged from a lifeworld already tainted with patriarchal values. The marketplace orientation that places supremacy on profits over life, and reinforces competition over cooperation, is a reflection of male values that are characterized by aggression and mastery (Hart, 1992).

I argue that the failure of critical theorists to recognize that their critique of the system is also a critique of primarily masculinist values, can be seen in the way the concept of the "lifeworld" has been idealized. Rather than explaining pathologies in the lifeworld as being caused solely by negative influences from the system, I believe that the system has reinforced lifeworld inequalities in power to create a structure that is based upon alienation and domination. As a consequence, critical theorists can only offer a limited critique that fails to expose why the competitive, market-driven, technical-rational approach to education is so pervasive. To widen the focus of analysis, I propose a critical feminist analysis that examines the homeplace and its connections to adult education.

### **The Homeplace**

The homeplace is an important site of the lifeworld. It is a centre for identity formation, relationships, and labour. The homeplace can be seen as both an abstract theoretical construct, and a concrete, everyday lived experience (Gouthro, 1998). It may go beyond the individual to encompass a larger sense of community (hooks, 1990). The homeplace is both a site of liberation and a site of domination, where women have struggled to be free of patriarchal power, and where they have worked to shape their own lives and those of their families. The homeplace is central to determining the quality of learning experiences, particularly for women.

Feminists have long noted the importance of family and home in the lives of most women. It is within the home that women's sense of self is initially formed, in ways that may have a profound effect on later learning experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Individual sense of identity is sometimes diminished by the nearly invisible role women occupy within the

homeplace, where the woman comes think of herself only in relationship to another - as a wife, as a mother, as a daughter. The low evaluation of the status of women in the home means that education is often seen as an escape from this limiting perception of self (Fagan, 1991; Cox & Pascall, 1994).

Relationships in the homeplace can serve as either an important forum for learning, or as a strong barrier to women's learning experiences. Many women speak of the positive influence of their mothers, and the pride that they feel in setting an example for their children in pursuing their education. At the same time, power is linked with knowledge. Some women face ridicule, sabotage, and even violence from male partners who may be resistant to having their partners continue their schooling (Campbell, 1993). To continue their education, many women overcome tremendous obstacles, juggling huge workloads and sacrificing their personal time. Minority women face dual barriers of discrimination (hooks, 1990; Johnson-Baily & Cervero, 1996). The belief that women are ultimately responsible for everything that happens in the homeplace is a deeply embedded social concept, thus creating a struggle as women strive to fulfil the demands of two competing, "greedy" institutions - the homeplace and academia (Edwards, 1993).

The homeplace has often been portrayed as a place of rest and retreat, but for most women it is a site of labour that is physically, mentally, and psychologically demanding. Despite societal devaluation of its worth, many women feel that their work in the home has merit (Fagan, 1991). When women's labour is diverted from the homeplace to other areas, however, it can be a source of tension and conflict (Luxton, Rosenberg & Arat-Koc, 1990; Campbell, 1993).

By examining the homeplace and its connections to adult education, we start to gain insights into the complex structure of the lifeworld. The critical theory of Jurgen Habermas tends to idealize the lifeworld as a harmonious sphere in which decisions are communicatively formulated. The tensions and pathologies of the lifeworld are blamed upon the detrimental influence of the system. From a feminist perspective, however, it becomes clear that the homeplace, as a central component of the lifeworld, has always been a complex site where pathologies already exist in the form of patriarchal power.

Critical theorists challenge the marketplace values of the system that emphasize a technical-rational approach to education, arguing that the lifeworld needs to be shored up against the encroaching influence of the system (Welton, 1995). I believe that we can better critique the "system" if we examine how it emanated originally from the lifeworld. Nancy Fraser (1995) makes the valuable point, supported also by Cohen & Arato (1992), that Habermas should not limit his discussion of power to focus upon bureaucratic power, but should also address patriarchal power. In doing so, we question the underlying value structure of both system and lifeworld, recognizing the complexity and problematic aspects of both spheres of influence on our society today.

### **Developing A Critical Feminist Approach to Adult Education**

I believe that feminist discourses can offer an alternative, more holistic perspective that can serve to challenge the dominant discourse in adult education which focuses on the demands of the globalized capitalism. The marketplace orientation of current discourses in adult education are a

reflection of primarily masculine values that stress competition over cooperation, dominance over mutuality. While male experience has often given priority to a singular focus and commitment to the workplace, women's lives are almost always complex and multi-faceted (Bateson, 1989). Harding (1993) argues the value of standpoint epistemology is that people situated in the margins are often privileged in being able to critique the mainstream. Women's perspectives may be better suited to challenge the predominance of the marketplace, as it does not always assume priority in their lives. The stories of adult women learners indicate that their learning experiences are often interconnected with others, both in their homeplace, and their communities (Campbell, 1993; Edwards, 1993).

I believe that learning should be connected to the lived, everyday experiences that all men and women experience. The breakdown in linkages between system and lifeworld has suggested that we need to forge new means of communication and develop a broader conceptualization of reason. Like Habermas, Sara Ruddick (1989) suggests that our society's concept of reason is often a very limited perspective. While Habermas (1987) develops a more abstract conceptualization of broadening our notion of reason to encompass humanistic and critical capacities as well as technical-rational approaches, she discusses a practical, emotive form of reasoning linked with the types of learning generated through mothering. This kind of reasoning is attuned to the needs of others and the complexities of relationships. She argues that in mothering, women develop a form of reflection in which they constantly question the purpose of their actions, the reasons for their decisions, and the end result of their labours. She writes, "this simultaneous, or at least rapidly shifting, double focus on small and great, near and eternal, characteristically marks their maternal vision" (1989, p. 78).

Hart (1992, 1997) questions whether our understanding of the notion of good, meaningful work can be understood only in capitalist, marketplace terms that undermine the value of subsistence forms of labour such as motherwork. She proposes an alternative focus for educators that draws an analogy to motherwork, arguing that we should develop "a holistic mindset and a holistic practical approach" to education that will lead to "a life-affirming perspective to guide our educational orientation and the way we think, feel, and act as educators" (1997, p. 133).

These feminist theorists challenge educators to broaden their understanding of the purposes of adult education to develop a more life-affirming approach (Miles, 1996, Hart, 1997). If educators were to develop a more holistic perception of education, that examined the implications of education in all facets of learners' lives, they would be forced to examine broader issues such as equity and sustainability. In addition to examining distortions in power created by money and political power, they would also be forced to examine other inequalities such as that created by patriarchal forms of power.

Currently, adult education often perpetuates a schism between women's everyday lived experiences and formal education (Edwards, 1993; Johnson-Baily & Cervero, 1996). The types of learning that would be more inclusive of women's perspectives would encourage the development of opportunities for students to reflect upon their life experiences and how these connect to more abstract forms of educational learning. Women generally favour connected forms of learning (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Baxter-Magolda, 1992).

Litner, Rossiter & Taylor (1992) argue for the development of a critical feminist approach to teaching that encourages discourse and affirms personal life experience.

Examining the significance of the homeplace in the lives of adult learners would broaden our perception of the purposes and meaning of adult education. It would affirm the potential of adult education to be a communicative, cooperative process that enriches the lives and broadens the horizons of the participants. Gendered differences in experience, and the diversity of minorities who engage in adult education would be better respected and understood if we were to acknowledge the links to the situated experience of each unique, individual learner.

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